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Empowering children: rights-based library services

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Abstract

For all who are concerned with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child offers support in library policy and practice. The Convention envisages to empowering children, as human beings and citizens. The UN Convention gives references to children's rights to literacy, information and education. This is a central message for children's libraries, school libraries and resource centres. A closer look will be taken to what these rights mean for the services libraries are providing. How libraries can help children to realize their rights.¹ References can also be found in the new IFLA Guidelines for Children's Libraries Services.

Children's rights should be guaranteed for every individual child and also regardless of circumstances. Can we involve children themselves in library programmes and their process of development and empowerment? Can we relate libraries to local, (intern)national agencies, e.g. UNICEF and others to realize their rights in a safe and reliable environment?

A number of examples of library services in these circumstances will be presented. The paper will also address what libraries can do in practice to apply children's rights in library services.

Paper

Libraries are seen as innocent places: once established, they tend to continue more or less under all regimes, under right wing and left wing party domination, under all circumstances. The basic difference might be the larger or smaller funds available for media, facilities and staff, and being more

or less deliberately involved in State policies. Libraries can be useful in the improvement of society or, at worst, maintain a situation of discrimination, exploitation and dictatorship. The main difference is the awareness of the librarians.

Libraries are not created in an innocent world. Also children's librarians must be aware of the larger world in which they live and work, and in which their users or potential users are born and grown up. What is this global situation viewed from the children?

1. World situation viewed from the children

In his major study on the End of the Millennium², Manuel Castells mentions a few aspects of the current world development with the words: globalization, over-exploitation and social exclusion: here he speaks about children. Around 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 years of age are working for pay in developing countries, with an increasing number in Eastern Europe and Asia in transition to a market economy. Quoting from an ILO report: "There are many non-pecuniary reasons [for hiring children], but the most important seems to be the fact that the children are less aware of their rights, less troublesome and more willing to take orders and to do monotonous work without complaining, more trustworthy, less likely to steal, and less likely to be absent from work." Apart from child-labour, there is sexual exploitation of children, a large-scale industry, organized internationally, taking advantage of the globalization of tourism and images. A distinct segment of the booming child sex industry is child pornography, with major producers and distributors of legal firms in decent European countries. Others aspects of children's situation on a global scale are the killing of children in war massacres and as child soldiers. Children who have participated in hostilities are often marked for life, mentally, morally and physically. Much of this we know – we discussed some of these issues at last years' Congress – but the point Castells makes under the heading 'Why children are wasted' is: "In the Information Age there is a systemic link between the current, unchecked characteristics of informational capitalism, and the destruction of lives in a large segment of the world's children. What is different is that we are witnessing a dramatic reversal of social conquests and children's rights obtained by social reform in mature industrial societies, in the wake of large-scale deregulation, and the bypassing of governments by global networks. ...And what is new is the weakening of institutions of support for children's rights, such as labour unions or the politics of social reform, to be replaced by moral admonitions to family values which often blame the victims for their plight." "At the roots of children's exploitation are the mechanisms generating poverty and social exclusion throughout the world. "Being excluded from relevant networks of wealth, power and information, the crumbling of family structures breaks the last barriers of defence for children. Hence we see an increase in child abuse and neglect, also in the developed world, with 22% of children living in poverty in e.g. the United States. As many children feel they have no roots, there is no future; they can only live the present, instant moment. This culture of urgency creates endless search for consumption, based on immediate gratification patterns.

The result of these processes is the structural irrelevance of peoples and territories, children and teenagers: the black holes of informational capitalism worldwide.

Making analysis of the world situation is not enough. Already during the Second World War an emergency fund was created which came to be known as UNICEF, closely linked to the United Nations' activities. It is sad to say that its work is still terribly needed in many parts of the world. Apart from its many projects and support programmes, UNICEF produces an annual report on the state of the art of children, and chose every year also another theme to focus on. This is valuable material, also for library strategies on literacy and educational support.

The children of today are the real challenge for the future. We have so many questions regarding children: What kind of future do we leave for them? Do we teach them knowledge they can use in the future? Do we create an environment in which they can live with absence of war and violence, sustainable development and healthy food? Will they have jobs and activities that satisfy their needs without exploiting others? Do they have access to information for their needs of today and tomorrow? Children are the challenge for the future, because they already seem to live in the future. In fact, they could be called the adults in the digital age, whereas adults seem to be the children of that age, learning by trial and error to master new skills. Children nowadays have no problems with using new technology. They can understand and play new digital games much faster than adults. They, manage to live with their parents, keep up with new fashions, music and sports and they can design their own school programmes and social lives and organise their activities themselves if we allow them to do so. Children are the challenge because they live today. They might not like school, because it does not offer them what they are looking for on their own terms. They might not like reading, because it is

presented as an enforced activity. Some children would like to skip school, behave aggressively, show disinterest; other children have to go in shifts, or have no school to go to at all, have no family to rely on, have no one to talk to about their questions and what really concerns them.

Should they wait until later, 'until they are big enough?', until we have put all our answers in a database? Children are the challenge, because not all information can be put in a database. Human development begins with children's questions. Human values are the challenge. Human rights may protect them.

2. Convention on the Rights of the Child: empowerment

It took a long time before people realised that children were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and that they were bearers of human rights themselves. The UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) focussed on the protection of children, establishing their rights in ten principles. Over the course of time a stronger legal instrument was considered necessary. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) added a more modern approach, explicitly recognising children as subjects of human rights, competent in exercising their rights, giving their views and participating in society. A new paradigm was introduced: children as human beings and citizens, requiring protection *and* participation, a shift from a needs based to a rights based perspective.

The following figure may clarify the new perspective.

<i>Needs perspective</i>	<i>Rights perspective</i>
- A child is a passive recipient	- A child is an active participant
- Needs imply goals - including partial goals (e.g. 90% of girls should be enrolled)	- Rights imply that all children (100%) should be served
- Needs can be met without sustainability	- Rights must be met with sustainability
- Needs can be ranked in a hierarchy	- Rights cannot be hierarchically organised
- Needs do not necessarily imply duties	- Rights involve duties
- Needs are associated with promises	- Rights are associated with obligations
- Needs may vary across cultures and settings	- Rights are universal
- Needs can be met through charity	- Charity is not acceptable in a rights approach
- Meeting needs often depends on political will	- Realising rights depends on political choice

(Source: Jonsson, 1998)

In essence, a rights approach helps to get beyond the view of work with children as charity work and repositions this work (e.g. library services) as an essential part of the effort to support fully-fledged human beings and to create strong and healthy societies with citizens who are able to participate.

Marta Santos Pais, Portuguese lawyer and former member of the first International Committee on the Rights of the Child, now working for UNICEF explains: 'Respect for the views of the child, as stated in article 12 of the Convention is a principle which affirms very strongly, the value of the child as a fully-fledged person having the right to access information and to freely express views in all matters affecting him or her, having those views respected and given due weight. It indicates the right of the child to access and participate in decision-making processes affecting his or her life and influence decisions taken on his or her behalf with-in the family, in the school or in the community. For this reason, this principle is often presented as a right of the child to participation.'³

The role of information in empowerment

In the Convention (CRC), a number of articles are especially interesting for those serving children in libraries and education, among which the right of access to information is crucial. In the words of UNICEF-director Carol Bellamy: 'Perhaps the most important aspect of access to information is how it empowers those who have it. Access to information informs the entire developmental process protected by the Convention and is a critical factor in both the personal development of a child into adulthood, as well as the social development of that child into full membership in his or her community.'⁴ This clarification points immediately to a number of activities which libraries undertake and can undertake to support children in their development and to protect their human rights. The

major shift in thinking and doing, which has to be made is, to work *with* children in stead of doing and deciding *for* them.

“Authentic child participation must start from children and young people themselves, on their own terms, within their own realities and in pursuit of their own visions, dreams, hopes and concerns. Children need information, support and favourable conditions in order to participate appropriately and in a way that enhances their dignity and self-esteem.”⁵

Almost all countries in the world have signed and ratified the Convention: they have obliged themselves to apply respect for children’s rights in their legislation and policies. They report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and discuss the situation of the children. These state reports are publicly available and should be accessible through every library. [How many of us have read the report of our home country?] The Convention states in article 42 that the Convention, its content and applications should be made known to children and adults. Here is a first practical hint for libraries.

The UN Committee has also published some general comments to help States to implement the Convention. In one of its General Comments, the Committee states:

“Children’s special and dependent status creates real difficulties for them in pursuing remedies for breaches of their rights. So States need to give particular attention to ensuring that there are effective, child-sensitive procedures available to children and their representatives. These should include the provision of child-friendly information, advice, advocacy, including support for self-advocacy, and access to independent complaints procedures and to the courts with necessary legal and other assistance.”⁶

As the Committee has noted on numerous occasions, children are more likely to use services that are friendly and supportive, provide a wide range of services and information, are geared to their needs, give them the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their health, are accessible, affordable, confidential and non-judgemental, do not require parental consent and are not discriminatory.

Speaking about child-friendly information, libraries can easily play an important role by collecting information materials about children’s rights; by working with children on finding literature in which (violations of) children’s rights are described; in making new materials together with children. UNICEF and NGOs in many States have developed child-friendly versions of the Convention for children of various ages - a process the Committee welcomes and encourages; these should also inform children of sources of help and advice.

Cooperation with the media, using human rights based programmes, connect them with library materials, is another possibility to present practical information for the daily life of children.⁷

Human rights education

These materials can also form part of human rights education, which is mentioned in the Convention. This could be a project of libraries and schools together. The UN Committee comments: “Human rights education should provide information on the content of human rights treaties. But children should also learn about human rights by seeing human rights standards implemented in practice whether at home, in school or within the community. Human rights education should be a comprehensive, lifelong process and start with the reflection of human rights values in the daily life and experiences of children.”⁸

The Committee recommends that all efforts to provide training on the rights of the child be practical, systematic and integrated into regular professional training in order to maximize its impact and sustainability. Human rights training should use participatory methods, and equip professionals with skills and attitudes that enable them to interact with children and young people in a manner that respects their rights, dignity and self-respect.”⁹

Could we imagine that librarians and teachers teach themselves first basic and new elements of human rights, and especially children’s rights? Could it be part of our professional curriculum, such as the Committee recommends?

Health information

Another field, also mentioned in the Convention, is the child’s right to health information. This has of course become very important with the increasing HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Committee published a general comment on HIV/AIDS and the rights of the child in 2003, stating: Adolescents are also vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because their first sexual experience may take place in an environment in which they have no access to proper information and guidance.

The UN Committee is aware of the fact that information not always reaches the children who need it most: “ As a result of discrimination, children are denied access to information, education (see the Committee’s General Comment No. 1 on the aims of education), health or social care services or community life. Children should have the right to access adequate information related to HIV/AIDS prevention and care, through formal channels (e.g. through educational opportunities and child-targeted media) as well as informal channels (e.g. those targeting street children, institutionalized children or children living in difficult circumstances).

Even if information is available, very often services are not sufficiently accessible to children with disabilities, indigenous children, children belonging to minorities, children living in rural areas, children living in extreme poverty or children who are otherwise marginalized within the society.

Adequate measures to address HIV/AIDS can be undertaken only if the rights of children and adolescents are fully respected. The most relevant rights in this regard are the following: the right to access information and material aimed at the promotion of their social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health (art. 17); the right to preventive health care, sex education and family planning education and services (art. 24 (f)); the right to an appropriate standard of living (art. 27); the right to privacy (art. 16); the right not to be separated from parents (art. 9); the right to be protected from violence (art. 19); the right to special protection and assistance by the State (art. 20); the rights of children with disabilities (art. 23); the right to health (art. 24); the right to social security, including social insurance (art. 26); the right to education and leisure (arts. 28 and 31); the right to be protected from economic and sexual exploitation and abuse, and from illicit use of narcotic drugs (arts. 32, 33, 34 and 36); the right to be protected from abduction, sale and trafficking as well as torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (arts. 35 and 37); and the right to physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (art. 39). Children are confronted with serious challenges to the above-mentioned rights as a result of the epidemic. The Convention, and in particular the four general principles with their comprehensive approach, provide a powerful framework for efforts to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on the lives of children. The holistic rights-based approach required to implement the Convention is the optimal tool for addressing the broader range of issues that relate to prevention, treatment and care efforts. (p. 3)¹⁰

3. Children’s rights and libraries

It will be clear from these explorations of the world situation of children, and the major effort to defend and protect their rights, that libraries also have a role to play. It becomes very clear from the new *IFLA Guidelines for children’s libraries services*, that the framework for children’s libraries is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children’s libraries are committed to human values and human rights. Children should be able to count on their libraries for their rights to information and education, for their personal development, their rights to freedom of expression, to religion or belief and to citizenship, for cultural participation and health information; for knowing about their rights and for finding sources to create better lives.

Libraries are best equipped to create an impartial environment, to facilitate children’s participation and stimulate reading for practical matters and pleasure, for life protection and life enjoyment by children.

It is therefore useful that all library associations, and especially their sections of children’s librarians, take the effort to find out about their State reports to the UN Committee and the comments made by the Committee. In many countries NGO’s and societal organisations have the possibility to make comments on the report before submitted to the Committee or they publish an own-initiative report. Libraries could here join forces with other child-serving organisations.

In general, from a library point of view, it is only seldom that library and information services are mentioned in the State reports. Much needs to be done here, to draw attention to the role libraries should play in the child supporting policies.

Argentina

Just to take Argentina as an example: For the second time a State report was submitted. A national delegation discussed the report on 8th of May 2002 and the UN Committee considered it with some comments.¹¹

Dr. Norberto Liwski, Argentina’s Secretary of State and President of the National Council for Children, Adolescents and Family appealed to the world for ‘understanding, solidarity and help’ to start healing wounds that the economic crisis opened up in its social texture. “In my country, the status of the children and teenagers who live in those families is the most dramatic and undisguised face of the crisis. They are the most visible victims of the current emergency. And we know that, should this situation continue, we will jeopardise the future of our country for generations to come. Currently six

out of every ten Argentine children grow and develop under the level of poverty. About one and a half million teenagers are excluded from education and work. Both groups show signs of high social vulnerability. Owing to the lack of support and advocacy, the conduct of teenagers frequently leads to conflict with the criminal law. We will use every endeavour to integrate these sectors with active policies, instead of turning to simple advances on criminal law.”

Under these circumstances the main governmental goals for children are: starting life in better conditions; guaranteeing the quality of education; and widening the participation of children and teenagers in their communities.¹²

In the comments by the UN Committee a number of issues also important for libraries were mentioned. Among these are:

- that the State party still lacks a clearly defined and comprehensive child rights policy and plan of action for the implementation of the Convention.
- that the right of all children to participate in schools, as well as outside in all matters concerning them, needs to be further strengthened.
- that education in human and children's rights needs to be strengthened and expanded.

The delegation had mentioned that a story book entitled "I'm counting on you", offering specific instruction in the rights of the child, was published in 1998 and distributed free of charge. It is unclear from the documents how libraries were involved; schools joined a National Campaign for the Rights of the Child.

Libraries are only mentioned in the field of literacy and adult education and related to teacher-education, which also includes an electronic internet-based training system.

Reading is mentioned in the State report, not at article 17 (access to information), but at article 31 on cultural participation and leisure time. (para 520 etc.)

“As in most other parts of the world, the reading habit is on the decline in Argentina. There may be many reasons for this, including the very rapid advance of television and video films and a change in the way people use their leisure time, a change especially visible in the habits of urban life.

Programmes to encourage reading have been introduced throughout the country in an attempt to reverse this trend.

The Secretariat for Culture in particular has implemented a nationwide federal programme to persuade more people to take up reading, with emphasis on the most vulnerable population groups: children, young people, women, hospital patients, prison inmates, etc.

The National Commission for People's Libraries (CONABIP) has been creating "special reading corners" and children's rooms in the People's Libraries.

The Children's Books Fair attracts more than 300,000 visitors every year to its workshops, play areas, shows and other events for children, young people and teachers.

The State also distributes textbooks, encyclopaedias and other reference works, children's literature (3 million) and Exercise books (7.5 million)

Preventing children's involvement in drugs etc. is supported by the distribution of informational and educational materials.

The Government voiced strong commitment to issues of children's rights and welfare, including education and health; however, austere federal and provincial budgets meant that programs in these areas received insufficient funding. The Ministry of Justice, Security, and Human Rights' Under Secretariat for Human and Social Rights worked with UNICEF and other international agencies to promote children's rights.

Some Non governmental organisation have commented on the State-report, among them Amnesty International, expressing its concern about the situation of children.¹³ The World Organisation Against Torture drew attention to a brutally repressed, peaceful demonstration by children against the gradual contamination of the water tables in their region, which in turn was poisoning the Mapuche community. NGOs and church sources indicated that child abuse and prostitution increased, although no corroborating statistics were available. A 2000 UNICEF report stated that sexual exploitation of children was widespread due to police inefficiency and lack of judicial intervention. The children involved usually worked in the same institutions as adults. The National Council for Childhood, Adolescence, and the Family has developed an Action Plan, together with the Attorney General, the Ministry of Justice, Security and Human Rights, the National Council of Women, and UNICEF, on the elimination of child prostitution. “

If we read all this, we should bear in mind, that in many UN Comments and State reports we can read similar descriptions of difficult life circumstances of children, and brave but insufficient measures by governments, who – in the words of Manuel Castells - are by-passed by global networks.

So what can libraries do? Form a global network of a different kind! In many of these State Reports and UN discussions, only the most obvious infringements on children's rights are mentioned. And what about the smaller ones, in daily life, in the lives of most children?

Libraries have a different role to play than NGO's, Amnesty International etc, they have their own responsibility in addressing the human rights of children; IFLA/FAIFE is part of that international approach. On the local level, it is in the daily, practical lives of children that a pattern is formed for future understanding and behaviour. It is here that libraries can set an example by creating favourable circumstances for a different approach to children; taking up discussions with parents and teachers; buildings partnerships with other organisations, but first of all: communicating with children themselves.

4. Joint actions

What libraries can do in this respect is manifold. Librarians must show respect for the child in their services and activities, protect his or her privacy, stimulate the distribution of children's books, encourage children with their right to social and cultural participation and make the rights of the Convention known to children and adults alike. All this is written in the 54 articles of the Convention and must be part of the library's policy. Have a look at: <http://www.unicef.org/crc>

UNICEF and many other child organisations have also adopted the Rights of the Child as the foundation for all their work. It means there is ample opportunity, also in developing countries to combine efforts for children's rights, for support of children in information seeking, and for libraries in various forms.

It might be necessary to put the library and information services in a larger and stronger framework: access to information is not a charity case or a commodity, but a right. The *IFLA Guidelines for Children's Libraries Services* give evidence of this understanding, but need further implementation and a range of best practices.

It is now up to the international library community, librarians and other professionals to show commitment. Works needs to be done at the international, national and local level:

- to start partnerships between IFLA and e.g. UNICEF; and vice versa on the local level.
- to include children's rights in national library policies and statements;¹⁴
- to give training to librarians on children's rights; and include references in their code s of ethics;
- to include the right to information and library services in UNICEF-projects;
- to implement widely protection of children's rights in library practices;
- to adopt the 20 November as a day of activities in the library on the Rights of the Child;
- to select children's literature for human rights education projects;
- to create a reliable and safe environment where children themselves can seek and find information; express their opinions and work with their skills;
- to discuss with children possibilities for improvements in their daily lives;
- and first of all: to listen to children and every individual child!

¹ Based on: Koren, M., *The Right of the Child to Information*, NBLC, The Hague, Netherlands, 1996.

² Castells, M., *End of Millennium*, Volume III: Chapter Globalization, Over-exploitation, and Social Exclusion: the View from the Children; Includes: The sexual exploitation of children; The killing of children: war massacres and child soldiers; Why children are wasted, p. 149-161.

³ Jonsson, U., *A Rights Compared to a Needs Perspective on ECCD*, UNICEF, Regional Office for South Asia, 1998.

⁴ Bellamy, C., *The state of the world's children 2004*, UNICEF, New York, 2003; Bellamy, C., *The state of the world's children 2003*, UNICEF, New York, 2002, p. 54.

⁵ Bellamy, C., *The state of the world's children 2003*, UNICEF, New York, 2002, p. 5.

⁶ General Comment no. 5 (2003) General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6): CRC/GC/2003/5, 27 November 2003.

⁷ The Committee held a day of general discussion on the theme “The child and the media” in 1996, adopting detailed recommendations (see CRC/C/57, paras. 242 et seq.).

⁸ HRI/GEN/1/Rev. 6, para. 15, p. 286.

⁹ See CRC/C/90, para. 291 (k,l).

¹⁰ CRC/GC/2003/3, 17 March 2003.

¹¹ CRC Reports about Argentina: For the initial report submitted by Argentina, see documents CRC/C/8/Add.12 and 17; for its consideration by the Committee, see documents CRC/C/SR.177-179 and CRC/C/15/Add.35. CRC/C/70/Add.10, 26 February 2002.

¹² CRC/C/SR.807, 23 September 2002; Second periodic report of Argentina (CRC/C/70/Add.10; CRC/C/15/Add.35; CRC/C/Q/ARG/2; written replies of the Government of Argentina to the questions in the list of issues [document without a symbol distributed in the meeting room in Spanish only]; HRI/CORE/1/Add.74); CRC/C/15/Add.187, 9 October 2002.

¹³ AI Index: AMR 13/018/2002 Amnesty International, December 2002.

¹⁴ A modest example is ‘*Start with the child*’, Report of the CILIP Working Group on library provision for children and young people, (CILIP, London, 2002) has at least a reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, p. 26, but not yet a strong programme based on it.

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